

CHALLENGES OF TEENAGE FATHERS TOWARDS FATHERHOOD IN VAALBANK, MPUMALANGA PROVINCE

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Abstract

Teenage fatherhood is a social and health challenge and the voice of the young fathers has mainly been neglected by existing research in the South Africa academic and scholarly landscape. Much of the studies have usually focused on teenage mothers, as a result, teenage fatherhood is left unexplored. This is because it is mostly believed that teenage girls are impregnated by older men. This study was aimed at exploring the challenges of teenage fathers towards fatherhood in Vaalbank, Mpumalanga Province. The qualitative approach was the most relevant approach utilised. The study used explorative design. A sample of seven adolescent fathers using purposive sampling technique participated in the study. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews. Thematic Content Analysis was used to analyse data. Teenage fathers are psychologically, socio-economically and emotionally affected with the idea of fatherhood. Moreover, they are overwhelmed by parental responsibilities. The study showed that a substantial majority of participants had feelings of stress when they discovered that they were teenage fathers. While, an overwhelming majority of teenage fathers reported that they were unprepared for their new role as fathers. In a nutshell, teenage fathers are psychologically, socio-economically and emotionally affected by teenage fatherhood. The study concludes that teenage fathers' experiences are negative as far as fatherhood is concerned. They are overwhelmed by responsibilities that come with becoming a father. The study recommends that Social Workers, Psychologists and other related professionals should develop primary prevention and early intervention programmes that are focused on addressing teenage fatherhood.

Keywords: *Teenage Fathers, Teenage Mothers, Fatherhood, Pregnancy.*

Introduction

In exploring the challenges of teenage fathers towards fatherhood, Enderstein and Boonzaier, (2015) aver that both fatherhood and masculinity should be taken into cognisance. In support, Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2003:45) avow that "link between fatherhood and masculinity should be considered in a socio-historical context such that 'paternal masculinities and manhood itself are mutually constructed and maintained.'" Furthermore, Mkhwanazi (2006) avows that there is a tension between genders when dealing with fatherhood. Several authors (Anda et al. 2002; Wei et al. 2002; Bunting & McAuley 2004; Miller-Johnson et al. 2004; Lee et al. 2011), have all discovered that teenage fathers unlike non-fathers suffer psychosocial challenges which also comprises of delinquent behaviour and educational challenges such as dropping out of school to address socio-economic challenges.

Teenage fatherhood has received very little scrutiny — far less than teenage pregnancy or motherhood. In support of this, Madiba and Nsiki (2017:501) avers that "little is known about teen fatherhood which is likely to be underreported because unlike teen mothers; they can deny paternity making them less in numbers." Yet, like teenage motherhood, teenage fatherhood has many negative educational, financial, social, health and other developmental consequences for these young men and their children (Thornberry, Wei, Stouthamer-Loeber & Van Dyke, 2000). Chideya and Williams

(2014) aver that teenagers who comes from low socio-economic background end up being teen fathers and as a result they end up being unable to support their children financial.

There are other studies conducted on fatherhood, however, those studies used quantitative research approach (Sheldrake, 2010). Although statistical data can help one to learn about the numbers and scope of young fatherhood, they are less helpful in terms of learning about the experiences and feelings of these teenage fathers. Hence, Glikman (2004) observed that there is still insufficient research attention paid to the psychological experiences and life stories of young men. In addition, practitioners and policymakers have also paid less attention on teenage fatherhood. Sheldrake (2010) reported that, for babies born to teenage mothers, about a quarter of young fathers are aged less than 20 years. Paschal, Lewis-Moss and Hsiao (2011) aver that challenges associated with teen fatherhood are similar to those experienced by teen mothers. However, these statistics do not reveal the full extent of adolescent men who father a child as they only include those who are named on the child's birth certificate. This is because teenage fathers are excluded from the life of their children as they are seen as uncaring to their children and neglecting their parental roles (Smith, 2006).

Background information and Problem Formulation

Chideya and Williams (2013) assert that teen fathers, like their female counterparts, also have to work through their developmental tasks while at the same time trying to adjust to their role of being a father. It is essential that these challenges of teen fathers be understood as this knowledge can be utilised in the design of appropriate support programmes or measures for these fathers. Knoester and Eggebeen (2006) assert that parenthood presents important developmental challenges to adults and can lead to personal reorganisation and growth, openness to learning and new coping strategies. Teen fatherhood occurs when the teenager is developmentally stage of identity and becoming a father is an adult stage (Quinlivan & Condon, 2005). This means that the teen father will now have to go through two stages at the same time - something that will eventually lead to anxiety due to the un-readiness of the teen father to assume parental responsibilities in respect of the child.

In a study conducted by Reczek and Zhang (2016), it was discovered that the quality of family roles affects teenagers' level of psychological distress. This means that when a teen father does not receive support from his family, he will encounter distress because of lack of relatedness. Teenagers who become fathers are also likely to change how they behave. Their change in behaviour, Thornberry et al (2000) assert that teenagers end up engaging in risky behaviours such as smoking, drinking, drug use and dangerous hobbies. Quinlivan and Condon (2005) discovered that some teen fathers experienced stress since the time they learnt that their partners were pregnant. This stress is often caused by the realisation of their incapability to provide for their children, as well as the society's reaction to teen fatherhood, which is often restrictive and disapproving, thus leading to the development of shame and guilt. It is an obvious fact that most African cultures disapprove of teen fatherhood. As such, those teenagers who find themselves on the wrong side of their societal norms are likely to develop these feelings.

According to Barker (2003), teen fathers frequently face entrenched stereotypes perpetuated by their parents, the parents of their child's mother, the mother herself, and service providers. This is due to the widespread cultural beliefs that a teen father who does not marry the mother of his child is being irresponsible, when in fact his motivations may often be complex. In some cases, young fathers may want to be involved with their child, but the child's mother denies them the access to their child. Therefore, becoming a father can add pressure on teen fathers to perform, especially by being able to find employment, which will then enable him to support the child sufficiently. This highlights the

kind of roles that society expects the father to play in his child's life. Hence it can be said that fatherhood has consequences for teenagers' priorities about their economic roles. Forste, Bartkowski and Jackson (2009), found that teenagers who are fathers attach themselves to the labour force out of a sense of responsibility to provide for their children. In other words, fatherhood may encourage teenagers to seek regular, responsible employment, and this might put a lot of strain on their school work.

Research methodology

Bhattacharjee (2012) asserts that methodology sought to enable researchers to design their research so that they can be able to draw defensible conclusions about the phenomenon of teenage fatherhood.

Research approach

The qualitative approach was the most relevant approach utilised. The significance of choosing qualitative approach was that it is often used when a problem would have not been investigated before (Bless, Higson-Smith, & Sithole, 2013) and most studies have solely focused on teenage mothers, thus putting little emphasis on teenage fathers. This approach is based on the philosophy of Constructivism, which is of the view that individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences directed toward certain objects or things (Mertens, 2009). This philosophy was in line with the research topic as researchers sought to understand the teenage fathers' subjective experiences. The goal of this research was to rely as much as possible on teenage fathers' experiences socially, emotionally and psychologically. The questions were broad and general in a sense that allowed teenage fathers to be able to construct their own meanings of fatherhood. In a nutshell, this philosophy was ideal in qualitative approach.

Research design

Flick (2015) defined research design as a plan for collecting and analysing data that will enable the researcher to answer the research question, and it touches nearly on all the aspects of the research. For the purpose of this study, exploratory approach was utilised. This design helped researchers to explore the experiences of teenage fathers regarding teenage fatherhood in detailed.

Population and sampling

A study population is that aggregation of elements from which a sample is actually selected. The study population constituted of adolescent fathers between the ages of 18-21 years who experienced teenage fatherhood at Vaalbank, a village in Mpumalanga Province. The authors got permission from Hlalakahle High School. and to help them in identifying those adolescents who experienced teenage fatherhood.

Only adolescents who were between the ages of 18 to 21 years who had a child while still teenagers were purposively sampled hence purposive sampling technique was used. De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delpont (2011) states that purposive sampling is based entirely on the judgement of the researchers, in that a sample is composed of elements that contain the most characteristics that are the representative of teenage fathers. For this study, data was collected from adolescent fathers until saturation was reached.

Data collection

According to Grix (2010), data collection is the process through which empirical data are collected via a number of different data sources. For the purpose of this study, semi-structured interview was the most effective method used to collect data from teenage fathers. The importance of choosing this

method was that it allowed adequate explanation of information that proved to be important in understanding the experiences of teenage fathers on teenage fatherhood.

Data analysis

Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships among categories of data; it builds on grounded theory (Marshall & Rossman, 2012). Hence, this study used Thematic Content Analysis. According to O’Leary (2014:300), “Thematic Analysis is a method of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organises and describes data set in (rich) detail.” The advantage of using Thematic Content Analysis was its ability and potential to further interpret and highlight emerging themes and aspects pertaining to teenage fatherhood.

Findings and Discussion

Emotional challenges faced by teenage age fathers

Teenage fatherhood, from this study, appeared to be associated with a variety of emotional challenges. This was as a result of males being left to define their own identity and meaning as teenage fathers due to the decline in the consensus regarding fatherhood (Forste et al., 2009). The following sub-themes emerged: stress, unpreparedness for fatherhood and emotional support.

Feelings of stress to be a teenage age father

A substantial number of participants acknowledged that teenage fatherhood brought them the feeling of stress. This was to be expected because teenagers are not yet matured and they do not have the necessary resources to cope with the pressure that comes with fatherhood. Some views expressed by teenage fathers include:

“I was stressed by the fact that I was unable to contribute to the well-being of my child. Not being able to provide for the child because I am still a learner”.

Other participants echoed that:

“Being a teenage father is not an easy thing. It is stressful plus at the same time I wanted to enjoy life”.

These findings postulate that fatherhood is stressful to most teenage fathers. The finding thus affirms the assertion by Quinlivan and Condon (2005) who said that teenage fathers will have to go through two stages at the same time (viz., being a teenager and a father). This eventually leads to stress due to the un-readiness of fatherhood and the inability to provide for the child. However, it seems, this study contradicts with that of Chideya and Williams (2013) who asserted that becoming a teenage father made teenage fathers to feel proud.

Anxiety

The research findings highly revealed that, close to all, participants recalled feeling anxious upon learning they were going to become teenage age fathers. This made them feel unprepared to assume their new role of fatherhood. Series of reactions were reported, including being scared and anxious. The following excerpts demonstrate how teenage age fathers are unready for fatherhood:

“When my girlfriend told me that she was pregnant, I tried to suggest abortion to her but she refused. So I did not know what to do. At first, I considered to dump her and not get involved with

the child. I was nervous because at that time I was not ready as I was still a teenage father, and still depending on my parents for money.”

Other participants echoed that:

“After I learnt that I was going to become a father, I was scared to tell my parents because they trusted me. At the same time, I did not know what to expect as someone’s parent.”

The study depicts that teenage fathers are, in most cases, not mentally ready to take care of their children. One could thus deduce that, more often than not, teenage age fathers are unprepared for fatherhood as they are not financially independent, hence, providing for their children financially seems to be a challenge. These findings thus held a similar view with that of Maiden (2013) who discovered that teenage fathers were still at the developmental stage whereby they were not mentally ready to become fathers.

Unable to maintain contact with the child

Teenage fathers are unable to maintain contact with their children. Some of the response made are as follows:

“I cannot see my child and the only thing that keeps me away from my child is my ex-girlfriend’s mother. Ever since she knew I am the father of her grandchild, she has made it difficult for me to see my child. I can now tell you that I last saw my child two weeks ago (1 August 2016) and from distance. You see, what I want is to be able to see my child. Eh, you see when my son turned 1 year, I sent my friends invitations cards to come and celebrate with us but the grandmother of my child pushed me away”.

This response reflects how the relationship between the participant and his child is certainly strained. This teenage father struggled and still struggles to maintain contact with his child because of his child’s maternal grandmother. This affirms the findings of Breiding-Buss, Guise, Scanlan and Voice (2003), many of the young fathers gradually lost contact through lack of structured intervention and committed support from the child’s mother and both sets of grandparents.

Financial constraints as a challenge to teenage age fathers

Being a father includes being able to provide the necessary resources to care for a child. However, this seemed to be a stumbling block for teenage-age fathers as an overwhelming majority reported that they experienced financial constraints when they were faced with fatherhood. It was due to their developmental stage whereby they were dependent on their parents. The following are some of the statements made by teenage age fathers to validate the aforesaid assertion:

“Being a teenage age father was somehow because it was not something that I expected. I was expecting that my partner and I would wait a little longer, until we finish school before we have a child.... It was difficult because I had to share my pocket money with the child.”

Other participants echoed that:

“I was stressed by the fact that I was unable to contribute to the well-being of my child. Not being able to provide for the child because I am still a learner”.

These findings highlighted how teenage fatherhood was clouded by the financial constraints that come with being a father. According to Steinberg, Bornstein, Vandell, and Rook (2011), teenage fathers are more likely to be faced with question such as “how will I support my child?”. Chideya and Williams (2013) found that financial constraints usually makes many young males to initially deny responsibility of paternity due to their inability to take care of their children. For example, Barker (2003) postulated that teenage ~~age~~ fathers’ employment and financial conditions were important factors that influenced how they reacted to fatherhood. This is supported by Glickman (2004), who found that the inability to provide for one’s child has implications on the sense of self of the teenage age fathers.

Assuming parental responsibilities as a teenage father

All of the participants reported that being a father, to them meant assuming parental responsibilities. They reported that fatherhood entails providing financial support to their children. Close to all, participants reported that although they have faced challenges regarding their parental responsibilities as they were still dependent on their parents, they, however, made plans.

“I made it a point that my child was well taken care of, that she had food, clothes and I tried by all means to use my pocket money wisely so that I can be able to buy her nappies and other things that she might need. I sometimes went out to look for piece jobs and helped my neighbours when they needed someone who could help them to make bricks. When I helped them, they paid me and I saved the money so that I can be able to buy things for my child. Other contributions came from my mother. I made sure I took my child to hospital for check-ups. Sometimes I just bought her toys and clothes to make her feel appreciated”.

This finding indicates that finance was central as far as assuming parental responsibilities by the participant while others responses pointed out the imperatives of budgeting. Teen fathers had to move from being dependent to assume a provider role. This also highlighted the new responsibilities that teen fathers assumed for them to ensure that their children’s well-being was not compromised, even going to the extent of getting temporary jobs. This concurs with the findings of Forste *et al.* (2009), which indicated that teenagers who are fathers attach themselves to the labour force out of a sense of responsibility to provide for their children.

Conclusion

The study concludes that teenage fathers’ experiences are negative as far as fatherhood is concerned. They are overwhelmed by responsibilities that come with becoming a father. Thus, it can be safely deduced that the research had proven that teenage fathers are overwhelmed by teenage fatherhood.

Recommendations

In the light of the findings, the researchers thus recommend that:

Social workers, Psychologists and other related professionals should acknowledge and advocate for the recognition of the effects of teenage pregnancy on teenage fathers;

Social workers, Psychologists and other related professionals should develop primary prevention and early intervention programmes that are focused on addressing teenage fatherhood. The emphasis should be based on educating teenagers about teenage fatherhood and its likely consequences to the teenage father; and;

Further studies should be conducted to generate more knowledge on the phenomenon: teenage fatherhood

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